



United States Department of State

POST REPORT 2002

GABON

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Preface

The city of Libreville lies along an estuary just north of the Equator on central Africa's Atlantic coast. A charming but sleepy small town for many years, Libreville grew rapidly in the 1980s as the Gabonese economy, fueled by petroleum production, expanded. That growth has slowed in recent years with the steady decrease in Gabonese petroleum production.

Libreville's population is an estimated 450,000, including more than 6,000 Europeans. Colonial-style buildings that once predominated have given way to multistory offices and apartments. Residential districts, where modern apartment buildings and houses abut African huts with corrugated iron roofs, surround the downtown core of the city. One side of the city is bounded by an estuary with palm-lined beaches; on the other side, new construction has pushed back the dense equatorial rain forest which covers 85% of Gabon's land area,

At a small post like Libreville, you can expect to obtain a broad, overall view of an Embassy and simultaneously focus on your own specialty. Because few Gabonese speak English, a posting here also offers you a chance to learn or perfect your French, the country's official language.

This is the official post report prepared by the post. The information contained herein is directed to official U.S. Government employees and their families. Any other information concerning the facts set forth herein is to be regarded as unofficial information.

DEPARTMENT OF STATE PUBLICATION 10720

Bureau of Administration
Office of Multi-Media Services

Revised January 2002

The HOST COUNTRY

Area, Geography, and Climate

Gabon straddles the Equator on the west coast of Central Africa, bordered by Equatorial Guinea and the Republic of Cameroon on the north, and by the Republic of the Congo (Brazzaville) on the east and south. Gabon covers about 102,300 square miles, roughly the size of Colorado, or half the size of France.

Heavy equatorial rain forests cover nearly 85% of Gabon, with savanna areas in the southeastern and southwestern sections of the country covering an additional 10%. The remaining area is composed of bodies of water and developed areas. The Ogooue River, the largest river in West Africa between the Niger and the Congo, drains most of Gabon. Winding in a broad arc from southeastern Gabon to the country's Atlantic coast, the Ogooue cuts through three major geographical regions: the coastal lowlands, the plateau region, and the mountains.

The coastal lowlands lie along the Atlantic Ocean and extend up into the river valleys that slice through the broad interior plateau. The lowlands are lined with beaches and lagoons that are fringed with mangrove swamps; forests extend from the banks of the broad, slow-moving rivers and cover most of the lowland areas. Inland the terrain rises to a plateau, and in some areas to mountains as high as 5,000 feet. Although dominated by large tracts of thick forest, the interior of the country offers scenery of great beauty, including mountains, rolling hills, forests, and scattered savannas.

The climate is hot and humid during most of the year and is typically equatorial. High temperatures range from 75°F to 82°F in the dry seasons and from 86°F to 93°F in the rainy seasons. Four distinguishable seasons are evident, although they vary somewhat each year: the long dry season from late May until mid-September; the short rainy season from mid-September until mid-December; the short dry season from mid-December through January; and the long rainy season from February until late May. Rainfall in Libreville is about 115 inches a year (the U.S. average is about 40 inches); the largest amounts fall in October,

November, March, and April. The humidity is always high. The summer months, as in the southern hemisphere, are the coolest time of the year.

Population

With an estimated 1.2 million inhabitants, Gabon has one of the smallest populations in Africa. Its population density (an average of four persons per square mile) is also among Africa's lowest. The people are concentrated along the rivers and roads, while large areas of the heavily forested interior lie empty. During the past century, the country's population actually declined due to disease and related factors. Increased medical care and social services have halted this trend, but the population growth rate is still low. Economic development has been hampered in part by the resulting labor shortage, which has prompted a large influx of laborers from other parts of central and West Africa.

The capital city of Libreville, with its estimated 450,000 inhabitants (including over 6,000 Europeans), is a blend of modern, multi-story structures, one-story houses, and neighborhoods of concrete and wooden shanties. The city stretches in a long, narrow belt between the sea-coast and the forest on an estuary linking the Como River with the Atlantic.

Port-Gentil, with an estimated population of 100,000, is on the Delta of the Ogooue River. It has long been considered the economic capital of Gabon, since it is the center of the petroleum and plywood industries and Gabon's busiest port. Franceville, in the country's southeastern corner, is the third largest urban area in Gabon, with an estimated 30,000 inhabitants.

Almost all Gabonese are members of the Bantu language group. Over 40 ethnic groups have separate languages or dialects and different cultures. The largest group is the Fang, who comprise about one-third of the population. The other major groups are the Bapounou (22%), M'Bete (14%), Bandjabi (11%), Bakota

(6%), and Myene (5%). The remainder of the population is divided among over 30 other ethnic groups, including some 2,000 Pygmies. French, the official national language, is a unifying force. Official church statistics count more than 400,000 Catholics and over 100,000 Protestants.

A small but influential Gabonese Muslim population, which includes the President and a number of members of the Government, is augmented by a larger Muslim population made up of Cameroonian and other non-Gabonese Africans. The remaining 40% of the population is animist.

Outside the major towns and cities the people are grouped in small or moderate-sized villages and live in square, wooden or mud-wattle houses surrounded by small plots of manioc and stands of banana trees. Gabonese men and women throughout the country generally wear Western clothing. The large numbers of African expatriates often wear colorful traditional clothing.

Public Institutions

In the early 1990s, Gabon moved toward a multi-party democracy. It has a presidential form of government. The President is elected by universal suffrage for a 7-year term. The President appoints the Prime Minister and other members of the government. Gabon's current President, El-Hadj Omar Bongo, who assumed office in 1967, is one of the world's longest-serving heads of state.

Gabon's bicameral parliament consists of a National Assembly with 120 deputies elected for 5-year terms and a Senate with 91 senators elected to 6-year terms. The Parti Democratique Gabonais (PDG), once the sole vehicle for political and social expression, has been joined by a number of political parties competing for seats in the legislature. The PDG still dominates the political scene and has women's and youth branches at all levels. The other political parties are at various stages of development and organization.

The country's constitution established an independent Supreme Court whose judges are appointed by the President. Administratively, the country is divided into 9 provinces headed by governors, and further subdivided into 36 prefectures. The President appoints both governors and prefects.

Aside from the Chamber of Commerce (closely allied to the government and French business interests) and the Rotary and Lions Clubs, few social and/or philanthropic organizations exist. Independent organizations like Scouts or the Red Cross are quasi-state organizations.

Arts, Science, and Education

Gabon's intellectual, technological, and artistic life closely follows French models, although a Gabonese perspective in these fields is slowly emerging. The Omar Bongo University, founded in 1970, offers a degree to students in faculties of letters and humanities, sciences, economics, law, and engineering. Other post-secondary institutions include the Ecole Normale Supérieure, Ecole Nationale des Eaux et Forêts, Ecole des Cadres Ruraux, Ecole Nationale d'Administration, Centre Universitaire des Sciences de la Santé, and Ecole Normale d'Enseignement Technique, while the Ecole Nationale d'Art et de Manufacture offers secondary school-level training in various arts and crafts.

Traditional Gabonese art (mainly from the Fang, Bakota, and Bapounou ethnic groups) is among the finest in Africa, but unfortunately is largely unobtainable in Gabon. The Fangs and the Bakotas have for many years ceased to produce their famous reliquary figures, and almost all of the old pieces have gone abroad. Some small and isolated tribes, like the Mitsoghos, still produce some ritual masks and fetishes. Immigrant artisans from neighboring African countries have begun to emulate traditional Gabonese art styles for sale in the local markets.

Commerce and Industry

Gabon has an abundance of natural resources that contribute to a relatively prosperous economy, but the country has not been successful in transforming its

economy beyond primary materials extraction. The extensive forests, which cover 85% of Gabon, were the original mainstay of the economy. Now, tropical woods constitute only 13% of exports, having long ago been overtaken by development of the oil industry. In 2000, oil comprised 81% of exports and 30% of GDP. Few recent discoveries have been made, however, and annual oil production is rapidly declining from a peak of 18 million tons in 1997. The country's third important extractive industry is mining, with manganese representing about 2% of total exports. Once important uranium production has now all but ceased.

Despite decades of significant oil revenues, income distribution and infrastructure development in Gabon remain poor. The bulk of the Gabonese economy is oriented toward foreign trade. The value of Gabonese exports in 2000 was about \$2.6 billion, while imports totaled about \$1 billion. France remains by far Gabon's principal supplier (about 45 percent of Gabonese imports) while the U.S. is the largest customer of Gabonese exports (primarily because of oil purchases). U.S. imports constitute about 11% of Gabon's total, with the U.S. commercial presence concentrated primarily in the oil, banking, and computers/software sectors. There is continuing potential for U.S. sales in aviation and telecommunications.

Transportation

Automobiles

Due to the limited availability of safe local public transportation, a private car is a necessity for those assigned to Libreville, and 4 x 4's are recommended for those planning to venture outside of the city. Cars may be shipped from abroad on travel orders or purchased duty free from local suppliers. The shipment of foreign-made cars at government expense between posts is authorized. New cars are expensive in Libreville because the high shipping costs are included in the sales price. The most inexpensive way to buy a car locally is to purchase from another diplomat, but opportunities are limited. No restrictions exist on the sale of personally owned vehicles, but duty must be paid if the car is sold to a person not entitled to duty-free entry privileges.

Personnel planning to ship vehicles to Gabon should advise the Embassy before making final arrangements. Cars belonging to individuals not on the diplomatic list must be registered as Embassy official vehicles in order to qualify for duty-free entry.

The Embassy's Administrative Section will assist Mission personnel in obtaining a Gabonese driver's license. The shipping assistant will assist with car registration, as well as with obtaining local car insurance. Third-party liability insurance is mandatory and must be bought locally at a cost of about \$200 per year. Although collision insurance is available locally, it is usually cheaper to buy it from a U.S. company prior to arrival.

If you bring an American car, consider including commonly required spare parts such as new tires, spark plugs, light bulbs, hoses, belts, clutch disk, ignition points, muffler, water pump, oil pump, wiper blades and shock absorbers, all of which are expensive locally and may be unavailable.

Service for American-made cars is also available through a local General Motors dealership that has operated in Libreville since 1995. The full-service dealership offers a fully stocked spare parts warehouse, vehicle maintenance services, body repair and an advanced garage with GM diagnostic computers, tools and GM-qualified mechanics. There is also a Ford dealership, as well as numerous servicing facilities for European- and Japanese-made cars.

Local

Taxis are readily available and inexpensive. Taxi drivers pick up anyone going in their general direction. The result is often a lengthy, crowded ride before you reach your destination. If you find an empty taxi, you can keep it for yourself by paying extra (you must specify "course"). Car rental is available through Avis, Europe Car, Hertz, several local independent companies, and different car dealerships.

Business Infrastructure. Most international travelers arriving in or leaving Libreville use Air France's non-stop flight from Paris. Air Afrique, Air Gabon, Air São Tomé et Príncipe, Ecuato Guineana de Aviacion, Lina Congo,

Royal Air Maroc, Inter Air, and Cameroon Airlines provide service to many regional capitals, but often require an indirect routing. Travel to the U.S. necessarily involves a change of planes in Europe, Morocco, or South Africa. Libreville International Airport is not far from downtown. Domestic air service links Libreville to provincial capitals such as Port-Gentil, Franceville, and Oyem.

Regional

No cruise ships call at Libreville, though accommodations can at times be arranged on cargo vessels traveling north or south along the coast. These accommodations require advance booking and considerable flexibility in travel. Passenger service on the Transgabon Railroad is available between Libreville and Franceville, with a stop near La Lope, a game reserve located about 5 hours outside Libreville.

Only 700 kilometers of Gabon's 7,000 kilometers of roadway are paved. During the dry season, it is possible to travel to some of the interior by road in two-wheel-drive vehicles, but four-wheel drive is a necessity once the rains begin in earnest.

Communications

Telephone and Telegraph

Local- and long-distance telephone service is available 24 hours daily with sporadic outages. Long-distance telephone service is good but expensive; calls to the U.S. cost \$3 per minute. AT&T long-distance calling service is available. Many Mission personnel subscribe to callback services, which tend to be the most economical way to call the U.S. Cell phone service has expanded in recent years. A rechargeable cell phone can be purchased for \$100; calling cards run from \$5-\$20. Telegraph service is usually available to most parts of the world during normal working hours at the post office, and until noon on Saturdays, Sundays, and holidays, but is not available at night. The Embassy switchboard telephone number is country code (241) 76-20-03 or 76-20-04. For emergencies

afterhours, dial (241) 74-34-92 to contact the Embassy guard.

Internet service is available at home for a one-time charge of about \$15, plus a per-minute connection charge that can add up quickly. The Internet functions slowly during peak periods (8 a.m. to 8 p.m.) and has limited downloading capabilities. Internet service is also sometimes non-functional for days on end due to "maintenance." The national telephone company asserts that Internet connection speeds and availability will improve when ongoing construction of a submarine fiber-optic cable connection is completed.

Mail and Pouch

Regular air and sea mail service exists between Libreville and the U.S. via the diplomatic pouch and the Gabonese postal system. Transit time for international airmail to the U.S. is erratic, and the service should not be considered reliable; pouch mail transit time from the U.S. is 10-20 days. An international airmail letter to the U.S. costs about \$1.20. Packages can also be sent to the U.S. via courier services such as DHL, for about \$8-\$10 per pound. Packages, newspapers, and magazines from the U.S. can be mailed to the Department for forwarding through pouch facilities. These items normally arrive in 2-3 weeks. International surface mail takes 3 months or longer. The correct mailing addresses for State Department official personnel are as follows:

International Mail:
Ambassade des Etats-Unis d'Amerique
B.P. 4000
Libreville, Gabon

Pouch:
Department of State
2270 Libreville Place
Washington, D.C. 20521-2270
(Use ZIP code 20521-2270 for all pouch mail, including packages and publications.)

Radio and TV

Gabonese AM and FM radio stations broadcast around the clock (in French) and carry Radio France Internationale and some VOA broadcasts. For additional VOA, BBC, and other services, a multi-band short-wave radio is needed. Bring

radio equipment from the U.S., as it is expensive locally. Gabonese television broadcasts from early morning to late evening on four channels. Daily news programs cover local and international events, and full-length films (always in French) are shown frequently. Embassy housing includes free AFRTS hookups. Pay cable-TV and satellite services are also available providing CNN, TNT, SuperSport, and several French and South African stations. American TV sets (NTSC mode) are not compatible with local broadcasts. Multisystem TVs and VCRs that can receive, play or tape in U.S. and SECAM modes are preferred.

A video club at the American International School carries American VHS tapes. Libreville also offers a number of commercial video clubs, but their tapes are VHS-SECAM and are recorded or dubbed in French. The Embassy participates in the Navy Motion Picture Program, with a current-run film shown every Friday night.

Newspapers, Magazines, and Technical Journals

L'Union, a multi-page, French-language newspaper, is published daily with a modicum of international news. Several other newspapers associated with various local political parties/associations are also available. The Embassy receives the *International Herald Tribune* 1-5 days after the publication date. *Time* and *Newsweek* are available at local newsstands, as are French papers and magazines. Subscriptions to *Time* and *Newsweek* from Europe arrive fairly regularly each week. Other magazine subscriptions should be sent through the diplomatic pouch. Local newsstands are well stocked with French newspapers and periodicals, but English-language publications are difficult to find locally.

Health and Medicine

Medical Facilities

The Embassy shares a small Health Unit with the Peace Corps. A trained English speaking doctor is available 25 hours a week. The Regional Medical Officer, located in Lagos, Nigeria, visits

T h e H O S T C O U N T R Y

Libreville twice a year. Libreville offers adequate medical facilities for ordinary problems, though nursing care may be poor. In addition to a large public hospital, expatriate (usually French or Moroccan) physicians staff several private clinics, including the Polyclinique El-Rapha, inaugurated in early 2000. The clinic includes an MRI, CAT scan, and ICU, and has been used by the Embassy employees with favorable results. Taken together, these various facilities include among their medical personnel a number of specialists (in areas such as obstetrics/gynecology, dermatology, and pediatrics) as well as general practitioners and can cope with a wide variety of routine medical problems. Several private dentists practice in Libreville. The Department of State still recommends a medevac for delivery of a child, for surgery, and for other medical problems for which no specialist is available locally. The nearest medevac point is Johannesburg, South Africa, 4 hours away by plane. Very few medical professionals in Libreville speak English.

Community Health

The level of community sanitation in Libreville is poor compared to that in the

U.S. Garbage, for example, is theoretically picked up three times per week, but the overflowing trash cans and improvised garbage dumps found in every residential neighborhood testify to the inadequacy of garbage collection. Snakes (some of them poisonous) and rats are present in some parts of the city. Insects are an irritating problem and can never be completely eliminated, but screening and the use of insecticides can keep the home relatively insect-free.

Preventive Measures

Gabon has all of the diseases common to tropical Africa: malaria, tuberculosis, leprosy, dengue fever, sleeping sickness, etc. AIDS is a growing problem. You should be inoculated against hepatitis, tetanus, yellow fever, typhoid, polio and rabies (optional) prior to your arrival. Malaria suppressants should be taken for 2–3 weeks before arrival and regularly thereafter while in Gabon. The English physician provides malaria suppressants for staff members and can renew all shots in Libreville. The warm, humid climate itself has a tiring effect, making ample rest and drinking plenty of fluids essential. The climate and the lack of specialized medical attention can also aggravate

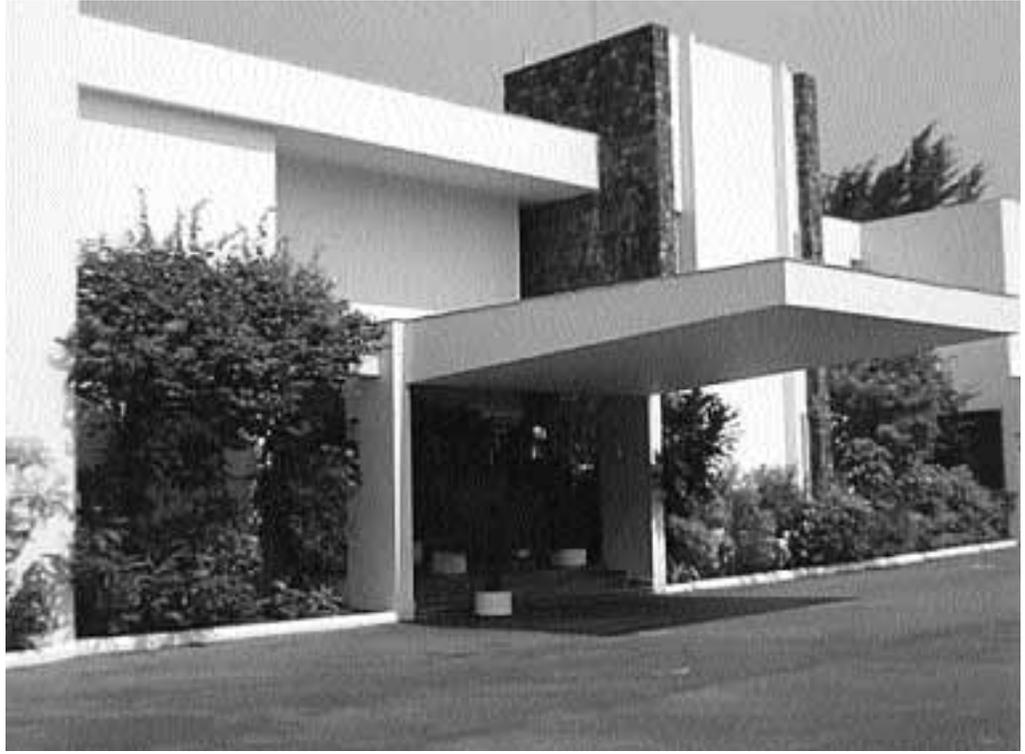
respiratory, intestinal, or dermatological ailments. The Ebola virus has caused deaths among humans and primates, but outbreaks that occurred in 1994, 1996, and 2001 were generally restricted to remote jungle villages in eastern Gabon.

Water in Libreville is safe but all water outside the city should be treated prior to drinking. Distillers are provided for all personnel and, if used, should be cleaned regularly. Many personnel prefer to peel raw fruits and treat raw vegetables with a bleach solution before eating them.

Employment for Spouses and Dependents

The Mission is usually successful in finding employment for interested family members, four of whom worked for the Embassy in 2001. Other possibilities include the American International School, Citibank, and the American oil company, Amerada Hess. There are also three American-run institutes for teaching English in Libreville. A knowledge of French is extremely useful in seeking employment.

AMERICAN EMBASSY



Ambassador's residence

Libreville

Libreville is an eclectic city that in the 1970s changed from a sleepy town reminiscent of the colonial era into a small metropolis. In the 1980s the entire city underwent a remake, filling the skyline with new multistory office and apartment buildings. The city's international class hotels are the Okoume Palace Inter-Continental, Meridien Re-Ndama, and Residences Maisha. Libreville is situated along a protected estuary with about 12 miles of beaches, the northern reaches of which are considered safest for swimming. The high annual rainfall encourages the growth of lush tropical vegetation even in the city, offering a constant reminder of the nearby jungle.

There are several large, well-stocked supermarkets as well as a number of smaller markets and specialty shops, including stores that sell only American products. Since nearly all of the products in the stores are imported from Europe and South Africa, prices are high by U.S. standards.

The Post and Its Administration

The Chancery is located in a remodeled bank overlooking the estuary near the heart of the city. The Administrative, Economic and Consular Sections are housed in newly renovated offices next to the Chancery. The Chancery telephone numbers are (country code 241) 76-20-03/04 and 74-34-92.

A Special Embassy Program (SEP) post, Libreville is organized along traditional Embassy lines. The Ambassador is accredited to both the Republic of Gabon and the Democratic Republic of São Tomé and Príncipe, an island nation about 200 miles to the west of Libreville in the Gulf of Guinea. In addition to the Ambassador, a Deputy Chief of Mission, a Consular/Economic Officer, a Political Officer, and one American Office Management Specialist make up the State

program personnel. The Embassy's Administrative Section is headed by the Administrative Officer and consists of a General Services Officer, two Information Management Officers, and local employees. The Embassy opened a Defense Attaché Office in the fall of 2001, with two American military personnel permanently assigned. An RSO is scheduled for assignment to post in August 2002.

Peace Corps first came to Gabon in 1963. About 60 volunteers currently work in environmental, agricultural and health programs. The majority of the volunteers are located in the interior of the country. Peace Corps Gabon staff includes a country director and two associate directors. The large Voice of America Relay Station on the Island of São Tomé includes three American employees and a number of local employees.



Ambassador's residence garden

Personal checks can be cashed by the Embassy cashier.

Cashier hours are Monday, Wednesday and Friday: 10:00 a.m. to noon. Embassy office hours are Monday through Thursday from 8:00 a.m. to 5:15 p.m. and Friday from 8:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m.

Housing

Temporary Quarters

Personnel assigned to Libreville normally move directly into permanent quarters. If this is not possible, new arrivals are lodged in a local hotel. Notify the Embassy of your arrival date at least 2 weeks in advance so that suitable accommodations can be assured.

Permanent Housing

All Embassy personnel are assigned to furnished, Government-leased or -owned quarters. Most U.S. diplomats are placed in U.S. Government-owned housing at the Sabliere Compound, which is located 7 miles north of downtown Libreville, close to the airport. The compound, situated directly on the beach, includes six attractive townhouses, of which three have three bedrooms and

three have two bedrooms. The residences are air-conditioned and completely furnished, including rugs and draperies.

Compound residents enjoy a common play area, large garden, swimming pool, and BBQ/bar area. The compound is nicely landscaped and ideal for children. The pool area was inaugurated in March 1999 and consists of a lap-size pool, children's pool, bar, barbecue, and changing rooms. The grounds are attractively lighted for evening entertainment and residents often hold parties and barbecues.

The DCM's 4-bedroom and Administrative Officer's 5-bedroom residences are attractive, spacious, short-term leased properties located between the Sabliere Compound and downtown Libreville.

The Ambassador's residence, a U.S. Government-owned property, is an elegant, spacious, two-story house located on the beach near the airport. The entire property has been landscaped and fenced. A paved driveway, ample parking space, and a three-car garage are provided. The main house has six bedrooms, eight baths, two studies, and large dining and living rooms. A large, well-equipped kitchen and staff housing complete the floor plan. The garden features a variety of flowering plants and trees. Spacious patios on the sea side of the house over-

look a swimming pool and adjoining cabana.

Furnishings

Since furnished quarters are provided for all Government personnel, furniture need not be brought to post. The allowance for the shipment of household effects is limited accordingly. All quarters contain basic furniture, including lamps, area rugs, and draperies. High chairs are not supplied. Most floors are ceramic tile. All bedroom and living room areas are air-conditioned, and all quarters have a freezer, refrigerator, dishwasher, washer, dryer, dehumidifiers, microwave, and cooking range with oven. Bring linens, plenty of dishes and glassware, plastic storage containers, ironing board and ironing board covers, pots and pans, cutlery, ice trays and kitchen utensils, as well as patio chairs, musical and sports equipment, books, art objects, pictures, etc. The air-conditioning and dehumidifiers help to protect most objects from humidity and mildew, but frequent cleaning and vacuuming are necessary. Household effects are generally transported in liftvans or, whenever possible, containers. Liftvans, in particular, should be waterproofed as thoroughly as possible to avoid moisture or water damage, especially during the rainy season.

Utilities and Equipment

All Government quarters have hot-and-cold running water in kitchens and bathrooms. All quarters have adequate bathroom facilities. Electricity has now been standardized at 220/230v; 110v current can be obtained only with the use of transformers. Some transformers can be provided by the Embassy for 110v equipment. Tape recorders, record players, and any other electrical products should be adjusted to 50 cycles before coming to post. In addition, bring voltage regulators to protect stereo and computer equipment, since the current fluctuates wildly during frequent electrical storms, and local prices for regulators are exorbitant. Bring a good supply of adapter plugs for electrical appliances and lamps. U.S. TV sets (NTSC system) are incompatible with local broadcasts (SECAM). TV sets capable of receiving Gabonese programming are available locally, but are expensive; alternatively, multisystem TVs can

be purchased through catalogs such as AAFES, or specialized export stores in the U.S.

Food

Post currently receives a consumables allowance. Most food in Libreville is imported from Europe or from other parts of Africa and is therefore expensive. Tropical and imported fresh fruits and vegetables are readily available in the stores. Local fresh fruit and vegetables are sold in the many markets and on fruit stands. The selection of meat (mostly frozen) is very good. Dairy products, including processed, long-life milk imported from Europe, are generally available at all times, but fresh milk is not available. Baby food is available locally. Some American products such as cake mixes, chips, and syrup, can be difficult to find. Most food items are available, if expensive, but ethnic and other specialty foods should be included in the consumables shipment. Freezers are provided for all employees, and are commonly used for storing flour and other staples as well as for frozen goods. Airtight plastic food containers are highly recommended to protect foodstuffs against insect spoilage. Plastics purchased locally are expensive and of inferior quality.



Sablere townhouses

Clothing

Lightweight clothing is worn year round, but bring a few light sweaters for the evenings during the dry season. Long-sleeve shirts and lightweight long pants are useful to protect against mosquitoes. Mission personnel often order clothing and shoes via catalog or the Internet.

Many have also purchased material locally and have had favorable results with local tailors. Bring a sewing machine, notions, fabrics and patterns if you enjoy sewing. Several stores sell fabric, including a large selection of African-style prints sold in 6-meter lengths called "pagnes." Dress patterns should be brought with you.

Men. Officers need at least five or six summer-weight suits, including at least one or two dark suits for government functions and official dinners. Much entertaining is informal, with slacks (or even shorts) and sport shirts the standard dress. Bring an ample supply of dress and sport shirts, shorts, underwear, shoes, sandals and socks. Colorful shirts in African cloth are locally available at reasonable prices. Hats are worn as protection from the equatorial sun, especially at the beach. Bring a good supply of bathing suits, rubber sandals, beach towels and sunscreen. Shorts and shirts are commonly worn for sports activities. White clothing and tennis shoes are standard for tennis players.

Women. Women in Gabon are quite fashion-conscious. Dresses and pants of lightweight fabrics are worn year round, both at the office and for social occa-



Sablere garden



Sabliere bar area at the pool

sions. Fabrics that will hold up well under frequent laundering are strongly recommended. Cocktail dresses are very popular at formal and informal gatherings; long dresses, skirts, caftans, and slacks are also popular. Shorts are usually not worn in public, except in casual settings. Summer dresses and separates are worn daily. Whatever your preference may be, bring a large supply. Shoe sizes and quality are limited and prices are high. Women should bring (or plan to mail order) enough shoes, sandals, and sport shoes to last a tour. Several swimsuits, beach towels, coverups, hats and beach footwear are needed. Shorts, tennis dresses, shirts and shorts are worn for athletics. Bring a large supply of underwear because the frequent laundering tends to disintegrate the elastic. Lightweight raincoats are useful during the heavy rains, but due to the heat and humidity, umbrellas are preferred.

Children. Bring lots of washable, sturdy clothing, as well as a large supply of socks and footwear. Orthopedic shoes should be brought if needed, as they are not available.

Supplies and Services

Supplies

You may wish to use your consumables allowance for a supply of toiletries, cosmetics, toilet tissues, facial tissues, contact lens supplies, soap, toothpaste, razor blades, shaving cream, deodorant,

shampoo and medicines, as they are expensive in Libreville and may be available only in European and local brands. Although pharmacies are well stocked, basic medicines, including malaria suppressants, are available through the Embassy Medical Unit. Other useful items include sponge mops, adapter plugs, can openers, and wooden or plastic hangers.

Although home entertaining is a major source of diversion in Libreville, good restaurants are plentiful. You may wish to bring an ample supply of cocktail napkins, ashtrays, hors d'oeuvre trays and other supplies that add your personal touch to a party. A large stock of china, glassware and flatware is helpful, as are disposable picnic plates, cups and cutlery. Thermos jugs, "blue" ice, and insulated coolers are essential for beach excursions, out-of-town journeys, and picnics. Barbecuing is also a popular activity. American propane gas grills can be used with a locally available adapter and local butane tanks. Stereos, tape recorders, short-wave radios, musical instruments, games, and as many books as possible will help compensate for the limited cultural facilities. Gift-wrapping, stationery, children's party supplies and gifts, and Christmas tree ornaments should be brought. Computer supplies available locally are expensive and less current



Sabliere baby pool

than in the U.S. You should bring any general equipment, appliances, or utensils that are important to your morale. Children's toys are expensive and less sturdy. Parents may wish to shop for Christmas and birthday gifts in advance. Ample beach paraphernalia for small children is a must.

Basic Services

The few tailors and dressmakers in Libreville can be expensive for any but the simplest patterns, but some are quite skilled. Several small shoe-repair shops are good and inexpensive. Laundry is normally done at home. There are adequate dry cleaning facilities in Libreville at prices somewhat above the U.S. The city has some good beauty shops that charge \$20 to \$50 for a shampoo and set, while barbers charge from \$10 to \$15 for a man's haircut. Household, auto and radio repairs are available, but generally only for internationally known brands. The service is undependable, parts are not always available, and prices are very high. Libreville has many camera and photo shops, but prices are high; developing a roll of 36-print film costs about \$30. Except for GM and Ford, spare parts for American cars and appliances are generally unavailable locally and must be brought or ordered from the U.S. Musical instruments and camcorders are difficult



Sabliere playground

or impossible to have repaired in Libreville.

Domestic Help

Although household help is desirable, well-trained domestics require some effort and patience. Servants' salaries are among the highest in sub-Saharan Africa,

but their skills are indistinguishable from others in the region. Well-trained cooks are also available, but not abundant. Except for the Ambassador's residence, servants do not usually live in. A full-time housekeeper/cook/nanny can range in salary from \$200 to \$300 a month, including transportation allowance and social benefits. Part-time housekeeping help can be found for \$10 to \$15 per workday.



Sabliere pool

Religious Activities

Libreville has several Roman Catholic churches and two Protestant churches of the Eglise Evangelique du Gabon (akin to the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.). American missionaries built one of these Protestant churches in 1848. Church services generally are in French, though one missionary group offers a service in English. Worship services are also offered by numerous other Protestant churches, including many associated with missionary groups. A number offer services in English. One international church with Protestant services in English meets on Sunday evenings. A number of Mosques serve Libreville's Muslim community. There are no Synagogues in Gabon.

Education

Dependent Education

At Post. The American International school (AISL) was accredited in 2001 by the Middle States Association of Schools and Colleges. The school offers a full curriculum from pre-kindergarten through grade 8, and can offer a supervised 9th-grade correspondence course through the University of Nebraska. It is staffed by a director, five full-time and eight part-time teachers. The students enrolled for the 2000–01 academic year come from the U.S., Germany, the Netherlands, China, England, France, India, Korea, Morocco, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, and Spain. Tuition fees for Embassy children in kindergarten through grade 8 are covered by the State Department allowance.

Several public and parochial schools in Libreville give instruction in French through the equivalent of high school. The schools follow the French national curriculum and include athletics, but teaching standards—especially at the high school level—may not conform to U.S. standards. The school year in the French schools runs from the end of September until mid-June, with vacations of two weeks at Christmas and Easter. Students can leave the first week of June without loss of credit if they have completed their year-end examinations. Allowances based on the rate for the American International School are ample to cover all charges in other local schools, as well as supplementary tutoring if required.

Away From Post. The Department's away-from-post education allowance is based on the cost of attending secondary school away from post.

Further information on schooling can be obtained by writing directly to the Director at the American International School of Libreville or to the Administrative Officer at the Embassy.

Post Orientation Program

Due to the small size of the post, introductions and orientation are provided informally to all personnel shortly after arrival. A sponsorship program assigns an experienced staff member to

newcomers. Knowledge of French is extremely valuable in Libreville, as few residents speak English. Subject to funding availability, the Embassy maintains a language-training program and materials for staff members and their dependents. Instruction books, laptop computers, CD-ROMS, and FSI training tapes for the French fast course are available.

For those covering São Tomé issues, Portuguese-language instruction is offered at the Embassy as well.

Recreation and Social Life

Sports

Sports and outdoor life are the main diversions in Libreville. Swimming, fishing, tennis, golf, and sunbathing on the beach are all popular. There is one horseback riding facility.

Water Sports. Besides our own Sabliere community pool, the ocean provides a popular diversion. At the edge of town are long palm-lined beaches, and swimming and sunbathing are possible year round, though the estuary water may be clouded with silt. Cleaner water is available north of the city (accessible by car) or at Pointe Denis (accessible by boat). Fishing or water skiing enthusiasts may send a motorboat (at your own expense) to Libreville or buy a boat after arrival, but maintenance costs are high. The Sabliere compound also has two windsurfers for residents' use. The deeper waters offshore abound in many types of game fish: tarpon, barracuda, sailfish, marlin, sea bass, and occasional sharks. Protected waters nearer the coast allow for skin-diving, although waters are often murky. Skin-diving gear is available locally at a relatively high cost. Sailing and windsurfing are popular. There is a small informal sailing club in Libreville, but light winds in the estuary limit activity.

Tennis, Golf, and Other Sports. There are a number of sports clubs in Libreville. Club Mindoube offers tennis, limited horseback riding, swimming, and a small bar and restaurant for its members. It has five lighted tennis courts and stables where horses may be boarded or rented. Membership can be arranged for Embassy personnel, but costs are high.

The Golf Club de l'Estuaire offers a challenging 18-hole course for golf buffs. The fairways and sand greens are reasonably maintained, but the rough can be dense during the rainy season. As a result, balls are frequently lost. Bring a large supply, as extra balls are sometimes hard to find locally and are always expensive. The course is relatively uncrowded, even on the weekends, and offers a regular schedule of friendly competitions. A membership fee is charged, as are annual dues. Club Saoti is located closer to the Sabliere townhouses and offers tennis and squash courts as well as a large swimming pool and exercise facilities. There is a restaurant and bar area and a variety of other activities is available. Hotel Atlantique, a hotel near the airport has a swimming pool, which you can pay to use by the day. The Intercontinental-Okoume Palace Hotel also offers access to tennis courts, a pool and a well-equipped health club for a moderate monthly fee. Several other sports and hobbies are represented by clubs in Libreville.

Hunting. Governmental controls on firearms and hunting privileges have made sport hunting increasingly difficult. Outings can be arranged only through personal intercession with the few expatriates or Gabonese who still have personal access to preserves. A few travel agencies organize photo safaris.

Touring and Outdoor Activities

The internationally renowned hospital founded by Dr. Albert Schweitzer, 160 miles from Libreville at the town of Lambarene, offers a pleasant weekend excursion from the capital. It can be reached by air or by a 3–4-hour drive on a paved road through forested landscape. With suitable advance notice, accommodations (including meals) can be obtained in Lambarene at the Sofitel Ogooue Palace hotel. The hospital staff offers a warm welcome to visitors and provides guided tours of the facilities, which include both old and new hospital buildings, and a small museum devoted to Dr. Schweitzer's life and work. A trip by motorized pirogue (dugout canoe) on the Ogooue River and into a series of adjacent lakes can also be arranged. Such a trip, which can last from one hour to an

entire day, offers an opportunity to see hippopotami, crocodiles, monkeys, and colorful birds.

The La Lope Reserve is the largest game reserve in Gabon, encompassing some 5,000 square km. The camp consists of air-conditioned bungalows with shower facilities, and a restaurant serves excellent food. The reserve which offers a good chance of seeing rare forest elephants and many other endangered species, can be reached by a 5-hour train ride or by car. Another interesting weekend trip can be made to the Nyonie Camp. The camp is located 70 km south of Libreville, and is reached via a 90-minute motorboat ride from Libreville. Nyonie is located along wide beaches with an African jungle in the backdrop. A 2-hour safari ride will take you into the jungle to see elephants, antelopes, buffalo, and other wildlife.

All parts of Gabon and São Tomé and Príncipe can be reached by air and domestic plane fares are reasonable. Travel by road generally requires four-wheel-drive vehicles, especially during the rainy season, but can be accomplished during the dry season in some areas in two-wheel-drive cars with heavy-duty springs and high clearance suitable for rough roads. Passenger train service is available between Libreville and Franceville. Most provincial capitals have adequate hotel facilities, and several private companies in the interior will offer hospitality to visitors with sufficient prior notice. Travel by car requires a pioneering spirit, but for those willing to make the effort, the countryside is rewarding. Highlights include extensive mining operations in the southeast; open savanna country in the southwest (with herds of buffalo and an occasional elephant); forested mountain ranges stretching across the central part of the country; agricultural areas in the north; and miles and miles of unbroken forest nearly everywhere in Gabon.

Entertainment

There is no lack of restaurants in Libreville. A large number of good French restaurants are available as well as those offering Chinese, Italian, Lebanese, Vietnamese, Moroccan, and African spe-

cialties. Most nightclubs have the latest modern music and some offer live bands. Organized by the American Embassy and supervised by the Community Liaison Office, English movies are shown every Friday evening. The local movie theater provides movies in French only. The French Cultural Center offers a variety of cultural activities including movies, theater, occasional concerts, and art exhibitions in French and Spanish. All U.S. diplomats' residences are provided with a satellite connection to the Armed Forces Radio and Television Service (AFRTS), with six television and a number of radio channels. Residents also have the option to pay for a satellite television service that offers a mix of English (including CNN), French, and other channels as well as 40 music channels. Short-wave radio reception from Europe and Africa is satisfactory.

Bring cameras and film equipment as well as sports and hobby equipment. Note, however, that taking pictures of military establishments or official buildings is strictly prohibited.

Social Activities

Among Americans. The American community consists of Embassy personnel, Peace Corps staff and volunteers, missionaries, a few business people, and their families. They tend to get together for informal picnics, dinners, and cocktails. An active International English Speaking Group of Libreville raises money for charity and offers several group activities, including mah jongg, bridge, golf, swimming, and French/English conversation.

International Contacts. Libreville hosts 35 resident embassies and consulates and 24 international and regional organizations. The diplomatic corps meets at numerous receptions as well as informally at dinners, luncheons, etc. A club of non-chief-of-mission diplomats also meets regularly and arranges outings. Social interaction with the expatriate business and professional community is also part of the life of the international community.

Official Functions

Nature of Functions

Entertaining in Libreville follows no set rules and you are free to entertain in the manner which is most comfortable and convenient. Outdoor barbecues, buffets, cocktails, and five-course sit-down dinners have all been used with success by personnel at post. Most Gabonese Government occasions require business suits for men. Women wear dressy cottons during the day and cocktail skirts and dresses at night. The Ambassador presents credentials in a dark suit (**tenue sombre**) or appropriate dress. Morning dress or white tie has not been used in recent years. The Ambassador and DCM may have an opportunity to wear a tuxedo, but there are no events at which one is required.

Standards of Social Conduct

Following presentation of credentials, the Ambassador calls on diplomatic colleagues and on various members of the Gabonese Government. Other officers call on their counterparts within the diplomatic corps and on working contacts in the government and private sector. Business cards are normally left on such occasions, and are also used as a transmittal when sending printed materials to official contacts. One should always carry business cards to social gatherings where new introductions into the community take place. Printed invitations can be ordered locally, but it may be more economical to order them in the U.S. The Embassy will also produce business cards in-house for all American personnel at no cost to the officer. White embossed seal cards are stocked at the Embassy for use by the Ambassador and DCM. Engraving services are not locally available, so engraved invitations and cards should be obtained before arrival. Ambassadors use engraved invitations (in French) on gold-seal cards for formal occasions and locally printed invitations on white-seal cards for other events, including luncheons and receptions. Colorful invitation cards are also quite useful for informal occasions.

NOTES FOR TRAVELERS

Getting to the Post

Include wash-and-wear and summer clothing in both accompanying baggage and unaccompanied airfreight. Flights to Libreville from Paris tend to be strict about the two-bags-per-person limit for passengers in transit from the U.S. Passengers starting in Europe are limited to 23 kilograms of luggage, though the airlines will usually allow up to 30 kilos per person without extra charge. Travelers exceeding the limits are normally asked to pay high excess baggage charges (as much as \$10 or more per kilogram).

Seafreight shipments require several months to arrive from the U.S., and 2 or more months from European posts. Airfreight takes 2–4 weeks. The Embassy provides new arrivals with a Welcome Kit that includes basics such as pots, pans, silverware, and household linens.

Customs, Duties, and Passage

No customs or duties are charged U.S. Government personnel. This free-entry privilege applies to all items imported for personal use throughout the tour of duty. Visas are required for all Americans entering Gabon; persons arriving without visas are held at the airport and required to leave Gabon on the next flight. Visas can be obtained from the Gabonese Embassy in Washington, D.C., from the Gabonese Mission to the United Nations, or from a French Embassy or Consulate in any part of the world where Gabon has no representation. U.S. Government personnel turn their passports over to the Embassy Administrative Section upon arrival in Gabon, and diplomatic ID cards and 5-year multiple-entry visas are requested. All persons entering Gabon are required to have a valid yellow fever shot.

Pets

Health regulations for animals are not rigorously enforced and no quarantine is imposed. You should be prepared, however, to present a Certificate of Health

from a veterinarian stating that your animal is in good health and indicating that it has been inoculated against rabies or has been in a rabies-free area for the previous 6 months. Gabon itself is not a rabies-free area. Make sure to bring heartworm prophylactic, which may not be available.

Firearms and Ammunition

Gabonese law does not permit the entry of firearms. Anyone wishing to bring firearms to Gabon must write to the Ambassador describing the weapon (make, serial number, registration number), his or her proficiency with the weapon, and the reason for the request. If the Ambassador approves, an appropriate request will be made to the Ministries of Interior and Foreign Affairs. When the Embassy receives approval, the petitioner will be notified in writing. After the weapons arrive, they must be inspected and registered with the Gabonese Ministry of Interior.

Currency, Banking, and Weights and Measures

Gabon is a member of the Central African franc zone via the Bank of Central African States (BEAC), which has its headquarters in Yaounde. The parity of the regional currency, the CFA (Communaute Financiere Africaine) franc, is tied to the French franc and backed by the French Treasury. The CFA franc for the six countries of the Central Zone circulates freely and may be freely converted to other currencies through the banking system upon presentation of commercial documentation. The exchange rate varies. In 1994, the value of the CFA was 540 CFA per dollar and went up to 780 CFA at the end of November 2000 before falling back into the low 700s by mid-2001. The BEAC issues the currency and controls liquidity within the zone through rediscounting facilities and administered money market. The interest rate structure is common to all member countries of the zone.

An import license must be presented for all imports entering the CFA zone that exceed 500,000 CFA francs (about \$750) in value. Private transfers of money to points outside the franc zone are subject to further documentation required by the Ministry of Finance.

Credit is provided through four main commercial banks in Gabon: the Banque Internationale de Commerce d'Industrie du Gabon (BICIG), a subsidiary of BNP France; Union Gabonaise de Banque (UGB), a subsidiary of Credit Lyonnais; the Banque Gabonaise et Francaise Internationale, (BGFI); and Citibank. In addition to the commercial banks, the banking sector includes: Credit Foncier du Gabon (CREFOGA) for housing; the Gabonese Development Bank (BDG); the Fund for Development and Expansion (FODEX), a parastatal organization funded by the African Development Bank and intended to provide financing for small and medium-sized firms (PME) owned by Gabonese nationals; and the Banque Gabonaise de Credit Rural, which offers loans for agriculture.

Gabon uses the metric system of weights and measures.

Taxes, Exchange, and Sale of Property

Restrictions

There is no limit for Embassy personnel on the amount of foreign exchange that can be brought into or subsequently carried out of Gabon. Visa, Mastercard and American Express credit cards are accepted at hotels, as are dollar traveler's checks. For all other purchases, the local CFA franc is used. Mission personnel do not pay income taxes in Gabon, but do pay an 18% value-added tax (VAT) on all items purchased in Gabon, which is refundable.

Facilities

The only legal tender in Gabon is the CFA franc. Currently, the French Government guarantees convertibility of the CFA franc. The Embassy Class-B

cashier cashes personal dollar checks of U.S. Government personnel for CFA francs at the daily official USG/FSC rate. Checking accounts are easily established at several local banks, but most personnel do not find them necessary. A service charge is added to such accounts annually, but thereafter dollar checks can be changed for CFA francs to be deposited in the account at no cost. All personnel should maintain a dollar checking account in the U.S. to facilitate the paying of bills outside Gabon. Cash is used for virtually all purchases, though one large grocery store will accept Visa with a 4-digit PIN.

Recommended Reading

These titles are provided as a general indication of the material currently available on Gabon. The Department of State does not endorse unofficial publications.

Few books in print have been written specifically about Gabon, and there are even fewer full-length works in English. The only recent book on Gabon in English is *The Rainbird: A Central African Journey* by Jan Brokken (Lonely Planet, 1997), an engaging travel narrative that also provides extensive vignettes of Gabonese history. Two other books, though over 30 years old, are still worth reading: *Africa Betrayed* by former U.S. Ambassador Charles Darlington and his wife (McKay: New York, 1967) and *Gabon: Nation-Building on the Ogooue* by Brian Weinstein (MIT Press: Cambridge, 1967). The book by the Darlingtons is a highly personal narrative of their experiences during their tour in Gabon (1961–64), while the Weinstein study offers a comprehensive account of Gabonese political history and structures. For a more historical approach, David Patterson's *The Northern Gabon Coast to 1875* provides an interesting if somewhat arcane history of the European presence in the region (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975).

Travels in West Africa by Mary Kingsley, originally published in 1898 and reissued by Virago Press, is a classic of its genre, as she studies the peoples and fauna of the region. Mary Kingsley was an intrepid Victorian who left England in her early 30s and visited the west coast of Central Africa. Caroline Alexander, who set out to follow in Mary Kingsley's footsteps in the late 1980s, chronicled her journeys in *One Dry Season: In the Footsteps of Mary Kingsley* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990). Other books include *We Went to Gabon* by Carol Kle, about missionary work in Gabon; *Gabon Today* by Mylene Remy (Washington, DC: International Learning Systems, 1977); and *The Tio Kingdom of the Middle Congo, 1880-1892* by Jan Vansina (Oxford University Press, 1973), a historical anthropological work with a readable style.

Additional material is available in French, including a 1970 volume by Jacques Bouquerel titled *Le Gabon* (Presses Universitaires de France, Paris). A few pamphlets on Gabon are also published by the French Government and the Gabonese Ministry of Tourism. Copies should be available in Washington from the French and Gabonese Embassies, respectively. A relatively recent French exposé on Gabon, *Les Affaires Africaines*, is banned in Gabon. For similar exposé-style writing, *Forages en Eau Profonde: Les secrets de "l'affaire Elf"* by Valerie Lecasble and Airy Routier (Bernard Grasset: Paris, 1998) describes in detail the Elf oil scandal of the mid-1990s. Some other recent publications in French are: *Le Memoire du Fleuve*, by Christian Dedet, about a *metis*'s childhood life in Gabon in the first half of the 1900s; *Mythes et legiendes des Myene du Moyen Ogooue*, by Annie Merlet, Centre Culturel Saint Exupery, Libreville; and *Le pays des 3 Estuaires, 1471-1900*, also by Annie Merlet.

Dr. Albert Schweitzer detailed his life at Lambarene in two books: *On the Edge of the Primeval Forest*, based on letters during his first stay (1913-17), and *More From the Primeval Forest* based on the second period at Lambarene (1924-27). George Seaver's biography, *Albert Schweitzer: The Man and His Mind*, covers in some detail the work of Dr. Schweitzer at his hospital. Beyond these, two older works in English, *National Unity and Regionalism in Eight African States* edited by Gwendolyn Carter (Cornell University Press: 1966) and *The Emerging States of French Equatorial Africa* by Virginia Thompson and Richard Adloff (Stanford University Press: 1960) offer good, if somewhat dated, chapters on Gabon.

Other books available include: Alan Carpenter and James Hugues, *Gabon*. Fernandez, J.W. Mbiti. *An Ethnography of the Religious Imagination in Africa*. Enchantment of Africa Series. (Children's: 1977. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982. Gardinier, David. *Historical Directory of Gabon*. Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1981.

Local Holidays

Currently, the Embassy observes 10 Gabonese holidays, some of which coincide with American holidays. These include:

New Year's Day	January 1
Aid el Fitr	Varies
Easter Monday	Varies
Labor Day	May 1
Aid el Kebir	Varies
Whit Monday	Varies
Assumption Day	August 15
Independence Day	August 16-17
All Saint's Day	November 1
Christmas Day	December 25